

Coping with Depression

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Mental Illness on the Rise

In their 2001 World Health Report, the World Health Organization reported on the condition of mental health around the world, estimating that 450 million people on the planet have a mental or behavioral disorder. Furthermore, depression is now a leading cause of disability around the world, and, among the ten leading causes of the global burden of disease, it ranks fourth. The World Health Organization estimates that, in the next twenty years, depression will move up the list to become the second leading cause of disease. They also report that one million people commit suicide every year and between ten and twenty million make an attempt.¹

Considering these points, it is very important for us as spiritualists to understand mental illness so that we can help people who suffer from some of these problems. By understanding the effects of these mental disturbances on the consciousness, we will increase our effectiveness. This knowledge is a way that individuals with a higher level of consciousness can assist in many environments and bring in God consciousness. The spiritual warrior must protect the healthy and serve the wounded. In order to equip ourselves, we will examine mental illness and specifically depression from a psychological, physiological, and of course spiritual perspective.

Causes of Depression

Psychosomatic Diseases

Psychosomatic diseases distinctly develop from the mind, and, in certain instances, a person's mind literally causes them to experience a disease or repress the symptoms of a particular type of sickness, even to the degree of paralysis. Psychoneuroimmunology is a medical and psychological science, which studies the influence of the mind on the body.² What does this topic have to do with depression? Psychosomatic diseases illustrate the power of the mind and are important for us as

we try to understand depression. Just by recognizing the process of thinking, feeling, and willing, we understand how thoughts lead to actions. If we repeatedly maintain certain thoughts in our minds, they will eventually turn into words and then actions.

Furthermore, when a person feels alienated or unloved, it affects the mind. More specifically, it activates the neurotransmitters, which then send messages throughout the whole body and consequently cause an attack on the cells and organs in our own bodies. Many diseases actually develop due to the mind's frequent attacks on the cells and organs in the body. The mind has just that kind of power. Conversely, when a person feels cared for and loved, their physical and psychological immune system actually gets stronger. Love literally heals, protects, and gives longevity, and a lack of love literally kills.

Biological Factors

Some types of mental illness as well as depression actually have a biological origin or counterpart. There are many different types of ailments, diseases, or problems that can cause a mental disturbance. Sometimes a physical imbalance such as sugar diabetes or low blood sugar can lead to an imbalanced mental state. A lack of certain vitamins or nutrients can create problems, even a thyroid problem. Some studies suggest that many people in mental institutions actually have a biological problem.

The Dark Night of the Soul

Christian theology has a term called "the dark night of the soul" or a period of serious testing which applies to all serious spiritual seekers. At certain times during our spiritual progression, we may go through periods of rapid advancement and growth although we may find it hard to perceive the situation in this positive way. We might reach a point in our lives when we begin to think, "I am chanting; meditating; praying; fasting; reading the scriptures; visiting the temple, church, synagogue, or mosque; and following the spiritual laws and principles, but I am miserable! Where is God?" At this point, one even begins to seriously doubt Krishna's mercy and attentiveness. Such a person might feel that even God has forsaken them.

Many times we fall into a state of depression because we have been acting in the right way and our level of consciousness has become more elevated, but we fail to understand the seemingly negative circumstances and challenges in our lives. However, the Supreme lets us burn up that *karma* so that we can move into another chapter. If you look back through your lives, you may even recall times when you have in fact experienced such a period and began to question God's existence or His fairness. However, when you look back now, you realize the purpose of such events in your life because they have helped you to increase or elevate your consciousness. Often, the result of intense suffering is elevation in consciousness. Such suffering gives us the intensity to break through the last layers of mundane consciousness.

The Influence of Subtle Entities

In some cases, different subtle entities actually affect the body. Some people's thoughts, desires, and activities are so degraded and low that they invite or allow very

negative and sinister entities to enter into their bodies and influence them to partake in extremely negative activities. Therefore, individuals who are not becoming more spiritual are gradually losing some of their freewill and their creative expression of consciousness. The bombardments of different types of influences and propaganda intrusion will have a greater affect on them. These increasing phenomena also can cause mental illness.

Women More Prone to Depression

Women usually suffer from depression more than men and have a greater susceptibility to fall into states of depression. One reason is that they usually have less control of their environments and tend to be more emotional. When a person has issues such as economic, political, social, or religious problems, it will affect them a little less if they have some control of the situation. However, when a person finds him or herself in the middle of a problem and must simply remain at the mercy of the situation, it causes so much more stress on the consciousness.

The World Health Organization reports that 20% of the world's female population has been physically or sexually abused by a man at some time in their life.³ If a woman has repressed certain aspects of her past, these memories may begin to surface between her late thirties and forties which can lead to some disturbances in the mind or consciousness. A man may not understand the woman's struggles during this period since some of her problems stem from issues of abuse during her childhood.

Misuse of Vedic and ancient cultures is another serious area that leads to problems and facilitates depression. A culture, which adheres to the idea that the man provides and dominates in a monarchical or autocratic arrangement, can become very destructive if the people abuse this philosophy. Instead of caretaking and facilitating the women, the men can create a completely opposite situation, which then leads to various types of abuse. When this happens, it of course produces great depression among the women. In many cases, the men just accept the arrangement as traditional culture without thinking deeply on the matter or feeling at fault.

Healthy Ways to Cope with Depression

Spiritually Minded Therapists

We now want to spend some time looking at solutions or at least ways of dealing with depression in a healthy manner. First of all, we have a need for spiritually minded therapists, or therapists who are appreciative of the spiritual culture, and most importantly, who are actually following such a culture. Although some of these mental challenges are physiological or biological, other mental disturbances stem from the mind, which means that talk therapy can help a person work through them. However, it can be dangerous to go to a therapist who does not understand or appreciate the spiritual dimension because they can even make one's situation worse.

For instance, when a saintly person starts speaking in a spirit of humility, the average therapist will categorize this as low self-esteem and begin to treat the problem as low self-esteem. They do not understand that humility is a part of the wealth of a

saintly person. The saint's gratitude and closeness to God ultimately make him or her humble. The aspiring spiritualist may be fixed in simplicity and renunciation, but the therapist may see this as anti-social behavior. The saint may be pursuing chastity or celibacy, but the therapist may see this as unhealthy sexual repression. The list goes on and on. For these reasons, there is a need to have godly devotees with special expertise so that they can service their own communities and keep the devotional focus.

Maintaining Both the Body and Soul

We sometimes think that we can solve all of our problems simply through the execution of the rituals, and actually such practices can provide the essential help if we perform them with sufficient depth and purity. However, since such depth is very rare, additional help is needed to assist the practitioner in the removal of various blocks. As spiritual institutions and communities expand all around the world, we need to maintain body and soul together. The Vaisnava saint, Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura, explained that, in order to develop a healthy community, we need to balance the following four needs:

- We need to take care of the body.
- We need to properly stimulate the mind.
- We need to have a sense of social well-being.
- We need to study the *sastra*.⁴

As we embark on the devotional path and experience certain types of challenges that go along with normal association, we should also seek out help, and if possible, search for those in the community who have a little more understanding of the physical and psychological needs as well as the spiritual aspects.

The Enemies of the Mind

Imagine a situation in which six enemies constantly surround you and incessantly wait for the opportune moment to attack when you put your guard down. The six enemies are lust, anger, greed, bewilderment, intoxication, and envy. These are some of the ways in which depression, anxiety, gloom, and frustration affect the mind. As soon as you become lackadaisical, they will swiftly approach. However, we can try to sufficiently reinforce ourselves and strengthen our weak spots if we know that *maya* will attack us in these weak areas. If we know the enemy's hiding place—the mind, we can keep our distance instead of remaining in an insecure position or allowing the enemy to constantly attack from an ambush.

Many mental breakdowns deal with the mindset of lust because unsatisfied lust turns into anger and then turns into great illusion and confusion. We can also understand depression as anger turned toward oneself. Enviousness also creates an imbalance within us. We should be *param-duhkha-duhkhi-kripam-buddhi* which means that we should feel the misery of others as well as their happiness. We should feel happy for another person when we see something positive happen in their life. Actually, we should feel the same happiness for them that we would feel for our own selves in that same situation. This type of mindset can help prevent depression and

mental disturbance. If we learn how to weed out these negative tendencies, we will find that it will lead to some wonderful solutions.

Relinquish Selfishness

If we find ourselves in a state of depression, we can also examine our degree of self-centeredness. There are two ways to play God. We play God when we see ourselves as superior and as the most important person. We also play God when we place ourselves in the center by thinking of ourselves as the most inferior or most unfortunate person. Other times people play God by considering that everything revolves around their problems. If you ask them, "How are you?" they will respond, "I am so glad you asked! I have a headache, stomachache, and a pain in my leg. I need a raise and my son is giving me such problems." By focusing too much on our misfortunes, it will reinforce our problems rather than eliminate them. On the other hand, if we try to help someone else or try to go beyond our own immediate situation, we will see that Krishna will give us the help we need and even take away our own particular issues. Depression means that we are focusing too much on our own problems and withholding our love from others.

Faith is Most Important

We will not have the ability to persevere without faith but we cannot fake faith. When certain aspects of a person's life are not going so well, his or her faith does get weaker. Our faith relates to what has happened in the past, what is happening in the present, and more directly with what we are anticipating in the future. If our past has been rough and our present is incoherent, our faith in the future will be weak. However, if we see positive events around us that we feel good about, we will have strong faith. Only a rare person can maintain strong faith when they have had a difficult past and a rocky present. In our communities, we want to create environments that will energize us and help increase our faith.

Gratitude as a Way of Life

Sometimes our mental challenges become very stagnant because we do not move through them. We do not appreciate the past, but the more we have gratitude, the more we create auspiciousness in the future. Sometimes the Supreme Personality of Godhead gives to us and sometimes He takes away. As devotees, we want to have such a grateful mindset that when God gives us so much wealth, we say thank you. When God takes it away and puts us into a state of impoverishment, we thank Him for protecting us from false pride. We thank Him for any situation that allows us to keep a simple life.

If we can just develop this consciousness and constantly thank the Supreme in any situation, we will be able to learn and grow from any circumstance. We will make the auspicious situations more auspicious and we will turn any inauspicious situations into auspicious ones. It will become a learning experience, and as we honor it with gratitude, Krishna will naturally make arrangements for us.

Conclusion

The mind is the greatest enemy although we can make it our greatest friend. It all depends on attitude. Setbacks happen in institutions, families, and to us individually but we want to avoid getting too depressed, discouraged, and disappointed. We should try to thank the Lord and try to learn from our circumstances. We wait for the Supreme to do more than we could have done for ourselves. This means that we need steady faith and perseverance. We can all encourage each other by first trying to have that faith and that faith will spill over and help someone else. In this way, we all inherit the Kingdom of God.

¹ World Health Organization, *The World Health Report 2001: Mental Health: New Understanding, New Hope* (Geneva, 2001).

² See the two volume work edited by Robert Ader, David L. Felten, and Nicholas Cohen, *Psychoneuroimmunology*, 3rd ed. (San Diego: Academic Press, 2001).

³ World Health Organization: Women's Health and Development, *Violence Against Women: A Priority Health Issue* (Geneva, 1997).

⁴ Thakur Bhakti Vinode, *Shri Chaitanya Shikshamritam*, trans. Shri Bijoy Krishna Rarhi (Chennai: Shri Gaudiya Math, n.d.).